

Giving Thanks Does Your Body Good

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Gratitude involves affirming the good in your life and recognizing its sources. It is the understanding that life owes you nothing and that the good things in your life are gifts that cannot be taken for granted
- › Gratitude is uniquely important to psychological well-being. In teenagers, gratitude has been found to correlate with positive emotions, life satisfaction, social support and prosocial behavior
- › Gratitude lowers stress, improves depression and improves emotional resiliency; researchers have suggested gratitude practice can be used as a psychotherapeutic intervention
- › One particularly potent strategy is to write a letter of gratitude to someone whom you've not properly thanked for their kindness, and to hand deliver the letter to them. This has been shown to result in an immediate and significant increase in happiness that can last for up to a month
- › A dozen different strategies are reviewed, all of which can help you build and strengthen your sense of gratitude

Focusing on gratitude has become a growing trend in recent years,¹ and for good reason. There's a lot of stress, illness and unhappiness in the world, and gratitude is an effective remedy for all of these – and it's free. For example, research shows that gratitude:^{2,3,4,5}

Alters your brain in a number of beneficial ways – Examples include triggering release of mood-regulating neurotransmitters⁶ such as dopamine, serotonin, norepinephrine and oxytocin; inhibiting the stress hormone cortisol; and stimulating your hypothalamus (a brain area involved in the regulation of stress) and your ventral tegmental area (part of your brain's reward circuitry that produces pleasurable feelings)⁷

Increases happiness and life satisfaction^{8,9}

Lowers stress and emotional distress

Improves emotional resiliency¹⁰

Reduces symptoms of depression^{11,12}

Reduces pain

Lowers inflammation by inhibiting inflammatory cytokines

Lowers blood sugar

Improves immune function¹³

Lowers blood pressure

Improves heart health,¹⁴ reducing the likelihood of sudden death in patients with congestive heart failure and **coronary artery disease**

Lowers risk for heart disease^{15,16}

Improves general health by encouraging self-care^{17,18}

Improves sleep¹⁹

Improves interpersonal relationships²⁰

Boosts productivity²¹

Reduces materialism²² and increases generosity,²³ both of which can increase happiness and life satisfaction

Gratitude Defined

As explained by Harvard Medical School:²⁴

“Gratitude is a thankful appreciation for what an individual receives, whether tangible or intangible. With gratitude, people acknowledge the goodness in their lives.

In the process, people usually recognize that the source of that goodness lies at least partially outside themselves. As a result, gratitude also helps people connect to something larger than themselves as individuals – whether to other people, nature, or a higher power.”

According to one study,²⁵ gratitude is “uniquely important to psychological well-being.” In teenagers, gratitude has been found to correlate with “positive affect, global and domain specific life satisfaction, optimism, social support and prosocial behavior.”²⁶ It’s even been suggested that gratitude practice and cultivation can be used as a psychotherapeutic intervention with positive effect.²⁷

Finding What Works

As psychologist Laurie Santos, who teaches the science of happiness at Yale, told NPR,²⁸ “It’s one of the practices that really wins out from the field of positive psychology, because it takes very little time, and the benefits are so powerful.”

As noted by Harvard,²⁹ there are many ways to feel and express gratitude, and all are equally valid. You can think back to positive memories, for example, applying gratitude for past blessings.

Feeling and expressing gratitude in the present helps remind you to not take good fortune for granted. Applied to the future, it becomes an expression of hope and optimism that everything will work out for the best, even if you cannot see the road ahead.

For best results, the key is to find a method that feels meaningful to you. For some, writing a gratitude list first thing in the morning might do the trick. For others, quietly contemplating what you're grateful for – past, present or future – at the end of each day works better.

One particularly potent strategy is to write a letter of gratitude to someone whom you've not properly thanked for their kindness, and to hand deliver the letter to them. In one study,^{30,31} doing this resulted in an immediate and significant increase in happiness score that lasted for an entire month.

When Gratitude Is a Struggle

Depending on circumstances, gratitude can sometimes be a struggle. Researchers say the best way to overcome this hurdle (which can trigger even more pessimism or guilt) is to find one tiny little thing to be grateful for, and to focus on that one thing.

Maybe you've lost your job and your car was repossessed but – thankfully – there's a bus stop within easy walking distance. Over time, you'll find it becomes easier to identify additional things to be thankful for.³²

Another way to flex your gratitude muscle when life events leave you uninspired is to identify and express gratitude for seemingly “useless” or insignificant things. It could be a certain smell in the air, the color of a flower, your child's freckles or the curvature of a stone. Over time, you'll find that doing this will help hone your ability to identify “good” things in your life.

Materialism and Entitlement – Two Common Blocks to Gratitude

According to Robert Emmons, one of the leading scientific experts on gratitude,³³ materialism and entitlement are two common stumbling blocks to gratitude, so if you cannot find anything to be thankful for, consider whether you might have fallen into one of these traps. As explained in a newsletter by Greater Good Science Center:³⁴

“Seen through the lens of buying and selling, relationships as well as things are viewed as disposable, and gratitude cannot survive this ... Research has proven that gratitude is essential for happiness, but modern times have regressed gratitude into a mere feeling instead of retaining its historic value, a virtue that leads to action ...

[G]ratitude is an action of returning a favor and is not just a sentiment. By the same token, ingratitude is the failure to both acknowledge receiving a favor and refusing to return or repay the favor ... If we fail to choose [gratitude], by default we choose ingratitude ...

Provision, whether supernatural or natural, becomes so commonplace that it is easily accepted for granted. We believe the universe owes us a living. We do not want to be beholden. Losing sight of protection, favors, benefits and blessings renders a person spiritually and morally bankrupt ...

People who are ungrateful tend to be characterized by an excessive sense of self-importance, arrogance, vanity and an unquenchable need for admiration and approval.

Narcissists reject the ties that bind people into relationships of reciprocity. They expect special favors and feel no need to pay back or pay forward ... Without empathy, they cannot appreciate an altruistic gift because they cannot identify with the mental state of the gift-giver.”

If entitlement is the hallmark of narcissism, then humility is the antidote and the answer when you struggle with gratitude. As noted by Emmons, “The humble person says that

life is a gift to be grateful for, not a right to be claimed. Humility ushers in a grateful response to life.”³⁵

So, gratitude isn't a response to receiving “your due,” but rather the recognition that life owes you nothing, yet provided you with everything you have anyway – a place to live, family, friends, work, your eyesight, your breath, indeed your very life. When you start seeing everything as a gift, opposed to things you've deserved (for better or worse), your sense of gratitude will begin to swell.

How to Build and Strengthen Gratitude

While keeping a daily gratitude journal is highly recommended, there are many other ways to [practice gratitude](#). I've compiled suggestions from various experts below. The key is to stay consistent. Find a way to incorporate your chosen method into each week, and stick with it.

Write thank-you notes³⁶ – When thanking someone, be specific and acknowledge the effort and/or cost involved.

Say grace at each meal – Adopting the ritual of saying grace at each meal is a great way to flex your gratitude muscle on a daily basis³⁷ and will also foster a deeper connection to your food.

While this can be a perfect opportunity to honor a spiritual connection with the divine, you don't have to turn it into a religious speech if you don't want to. You could simply say, “I am grateful for this food and appreciate all the time and hard work that went into its production, transportation and preparation.”

Change your perception – Disappointment can be a major source of stress, which is known to have far-reaching effects on your health and longevity. In fact, centenarians overwhelmingly cite stress as the most important thing to avoid if you want to live a long and healthy life. Since stress is virtually unavoidable, the key is to

develop and strengthen your ability to manage your stress so that it doesn't wear you down over time.

Rather than dwelling on negative events, most centenarians figured out how to let things go, and you can do that too. It takes practice, though. It's a skill that must be honed daily, or however often you're triggered.

A foundational principle to let go of negativity is the realization that the way you feel has little to do with the event itself, and everything to do with your perception of it. Wisdom of the ancients dictates that events are neither good nor bad in and of themselves. It is your belief about the event that upsets you, not the fact that it happened.

As noted by Ryan Holiday, author of "The Daily Stoic: 366 Meditations on Wisdom, Perseverance and the Art of Living,"³⁸ "The Stoics are saying, 'This happened to me,' is not the same as, 'This happened to me and that's bad.' They're saying if you stop at the first part, you will be much more resilient and much more able to make some good out of anything that happens." And, once you can see the good, you're more apt to feel gratitude.

Be mindful of your nonverbal actions — Smiling and hugging are both ways of expressing gratitude, encouragement, excitement, empathy and support. These physical actions also help strengthen your inner experience of positive emotions of all kinds.

Give praise — Research³⁹ shows using "other-praising" phrases are far more effective than "self-beneficial" phrases. For example, praising a partner saying, "thank you for going out of your way to do this," is more powerful than a compliment framed in terms of how you benefited, such as "it makes me happy when you do that."

The former resulted in the partner feeling happier and more loving toward the person giving the praise. Also, be mindful of your delivery — say it like you mean it. Establishing eye contact is another tactic that helps you show your sincerity.

Prayer and/or mindfulness meditation — Expressing thanks during prayer or meditation is another way to cultivate gratitude. Practicing "mindfulness" means that you're actively paying attention to the moment you're in right now. A mantra is sometimes used to help maintain focus, but you can also focus on something that you're grateful for, such as a pleasant smell, a cool breeze or a lovely memory.

Create a nightly gratitude ritual — One suggestion is to create a gratitude jar,⁴⁰ into which the entire family can add notes of gratitude on a daily basis. Any jar or container will do. Simply write a quick note on a small slip of paper and put it into the jar. Some make an annual (or biannual or even monthly) event out of going through the whole jar, reading each slip out loud.

Spend money on activities instead of things — According to research,⁴¹ spending money on experiences not only generates more gratitude than material consumption, it also motivates greater generosity.

As noted by co-author Amit Kumar, postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Chicago, "People feel fortunate, and because it's a diffuse, untargeted type of gratitude, they're motivated to give back to people in general."⁴²

Embrace the idea of having "enough" — According to many who have embraced a more minimalist lifestyle, the key to happiness is learning to appreciate and be grateful for having "enough."

Financial hardship and work stress are two significant contributors to depression and anxiety. The answer is to buy less and appreciate more. Instead of trying to keep up with the Joneses, practice being grateful for the things you already have, and release yourself from the iron grip of advertising, which tells you there's lack in your life.

Many who have adopted the minimalist lifestyle claim they've been able to reduce the amount of time they have to work to pay their bills, freeing up time for volunteer work, creative pursuits and taking care of their personal health, thereby dramatically

raising their happiness and life satisfaction. The key here is deciding what “enough” is. Consumption itself is not the problem; unchecked and unnecessary shopping is.

Many times, accumulation of material goods is a symptom that you may be trying to fill a void in your life, yet that void can never be filled by material things. More often than not, the void is silently asking for more love, personal connection or experiences that bring purpose and passionate engagement. So, make an effort to identify your real, authentic emotional and spiritual needs, and then focus on fulfilling them in ways that do not involve shopping.

Tapping – The Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) is a helpful tool for a number of emotional challenges, including lack of gratitude. EFT is a form of psychological acupressure based on the energy meridians used in acupuncture that can quickly restore inner balance and healing, and helps rid your mind of negative thoughts and emotions. In the video below, EFT practitioner Julie Schiffman demonstrates how to tap for gratitude.

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